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**EMPOWERING FAMILIES AS SUSTAINABLE  
PARTNERS IN SOCIAL POLICY**

**Hubert Brin**

***“FAMILIES AND SOCIAL POLICIES”***

## Families and social policies

First and foremost, I would like to clarify who I am: I am not a teacher, nor a scientist, a researcher or a professional within the sphere of the family, but I am a militant of family associations. I belong to one of the sixty French family movements called the « Confédération Syndicale des Familles », mostly set up in working-class areas. I have presided the Union Nationale des Associations Familiales (UNAF – National Union of Family Associations) from 1996 to 2006.

In France, the UNAF groups almost all the existing family associations irrespective of their philosophical, sociological, cultural and denominational diversities.

Of particular importance is the fact that it has legally received the mission of defending the interests of the family and of representing the families, wherever they are at stake. My expertise lies in this field and in the method inherited from youth movements with their cry: “listen, judge, act” or to take up some contemporary expressions: watch – listen, analyse, propose and/or decide. Therefore, my proposal is attached first and foremost to the life of associations and to the trade unions’ model of action and representation. I have stated this to explain the development of my ideas and to open up a discussion, and not to state that it is an example to follow.

I would like to thank the members of the commission and its president for having invited me to intervene in this conference. I thank them for their trust, whilst hoping that I will not let them down.

The theme chosen for this 57th conference seems particularly judicious at the end of the first decade of the 21st century.

In fact, although this topic finds its roots in the second half of the 20th century, it is mainly in the early years of the year 2000 that for most nations, the question of sustainable development became the subject of debates, not to mention decisions.

While the first altruistic aim of sustainable development, or to be more direct, its primary non commercial aim, is to leave a planet that can still be inhabited to our descendants, it is curious to note that the word family is almost absent from all the texts and conferences dedicated to it.

However, I think that on giving a closer look to just two examples such as the need to change our way of life and our way of consumption, and the necessity to preserve water, at the core of the answers to these problems, we find the family. In spite of its many faults or precisely because of all its faults, the family is on the frontline because it is the principal place of education and of transmission.

Obviously the problem of the family differs according to where one lives, whether it is in a developed country, in an emerging one or in a country that is still developing.

Since undoubtedly, this new « thinking of our common future » will be an unavoidable parameter in the future economic, social and cultural decisions, it is urgent to state that the family remains a partner who deserves to be associated, or at least consulted, in all the decisions concerning it.

I have used the expression « remains a partner », rather than « becomes a partner », because for me, even in countries where the family is not considered as a partner, it exercises this role. We are all very well aware of the fact that when the family is not functioning properly, the repercussions are felt by all its members and consequently, by society. This proof does not prevent however a politician from my country to compare the number of children in a family to the costs of CO2 of a return trip by plane from Paris to New York, to justify the fact that financial help is restricted to families having two children.

In the light of this quick look, since elected politicians regularly hold the family as the main entity responsible for the illnesses of society, and a bit less often responsible for progress and healing, since they are not faced with the question of sustainable development, acknowledging the family as an economic, social and cultural partner is not only part of the democratic concept but it is a must for the implementation of the indispensable changes to our future.

Incidentally, it is interesting to note that the theme of the proceeding of the UNAF for 2010 – 2012, where as I have just told you, I no longer hold any post of responsibility since June 2006, the theme is « there is nothing sustainable without families ». I deeply believe in this.

I draw your attention however to the fact that very often, the following expressions are associated to “sustainable development”: precautionary spirit, risk free society, perfect quality. Now, the association of these four expressions present a major risk of establishing a sterile society, a dead society, a society without any mystery, together with the creation of new social norms from which the poor are excluded. This small sentence is too short and mild to specify my line of thought, but that is not today’s subject. Nevertheless, so that the sentence « there is nothing sustainable without the family » comes to life, in order for families to be considered as sustainable associates in social policy, there are, in my opinion, some explications that are necessary and some conditions that cannot be ignored.

I would like to specify two of the necessary explanations :

- the word family
- the field of family policies.

Among the conditions that cannot be ignored, I will select :

organising the defense of family interests by the families themselves  
the legal acknowledgement of the family as a social, economic and cultural partner  
the organisation of public meetings between the government and all those responsible of family policies

Defining the word family

Why is this necessary ?

During the debates on the very first draft of the European constitution, the UNAF would have liked to meet the main drafters to integrate the family as a specific area in European instances.

To include the family in these instances, one had to tackle gender equality, the reconciliation of family life with professional life, endangered childhood etc etc but not the family policy in itself.

The answer to our request was brief : No, because the definition of family is linked to religion.

In another debate, this time an internal, French one, during the celebrations to commemorate the law passed in 1905 on the separation between Church and State, the answer was once again meaningful : family and secularism do not go together, since the family belongs to the private sphere ... the underlying meaning is that the family is like... religion.

We can clearly see how a number of States never make public their public policies regarding the family. We speak of fighting poverty, of taking care of the elderly or of people with special needs, of improving housing, education and formation etc etc, so many terms that, as is also happening in Europe, bypass and shun the word family.

Once again, it is as if this word « family » is frightening, and even though because of the impending drastic demographical decrease, some countries are revising their position.

However, whether one is in favour or against what are parents have tried to pass on to us, it is in relationship to what has been transmitted to us that we build ourselves. I am aware however that nowadays, the area of the family is taking on new dimensions, placed somewhere between yesterday's conventional model and the present, broken, sinusoidal, even homoparental, model.

Whether it pleases us or not, the spectrum of family configurations is stretching towards new horizons, even without referring to all that procreation techniques already allow nowadays, let alone what they will be proposing in the future.

It is therefore understandable that some associations challenge certain family models that are being promoted, but since sometimes they do so because of their religious beliefs, for some this is a vicious circle, it is only a simple equation : family equals religion.

If we want our governments to recognize the family as partners, we must surely specify what we mean by this word.

The first explanation, and perhaps the only one, focuses on the use of the singular (the family) or the plural (the families), since placing an ideological content on the use of the singular or of the plural will inexorably lead to the denial of both. There is the family, a community of people, of functions, of rights and duties, but since for each member of a family, this means specific social, economic, cultural and personal contexts, than the plural must also be used.

We are not dealing here with a juridical definition of the word family, and it is not desirable that the State take this direction, since this provokes the risk of coming up with a definition that destroys freedom.

Being an institution that represents all the French and foreign families living in France, the UNAF has dared formulate a definition, which had served at one time as foundation for all the works of the UIOF : the family is based on marriage, or on legitimate or adoptive filiation, or on the exercise of parental authority. It is this wide definition that allows all the different French family associations to agree on a common project : defending a global family policy. This leads us to my second explanation.

#### Explaining the field of family policy

First of all, I've noticed that the title of this conference speaks of social policy whereas we, the French, who at times have the habit of splitting hairs, we also create an ideological dispute on the distinction between social policy and family policy, where the aim of social policy is to fight against poverty, whereas family policy is based on a concept of universality, meaning all families, irrelevantly of their income. I immediately put aside this distinction because I do not think it's fundamental for the subject we are discussing. In fact, before examining on what conditions the association of families can take place, it is better to define to what we would like the family to be associated.

The title of your conference states social policies, but my question is : what do you understand by the word social ?

Family interests are not restricted only to social security or social benefits. In my introduction, I have already hinted at the fact that starting from the concept of sustainable development, families are concerned with other public policies, besides those from the social field.

Since we are in the field of the family, since we want to represent it and defend its interests, we must be interested in all family lives.

Let us take a few examples : we cannot seriously reflect on how to act against children's scholastic failure if we do not take into consideration questions like income, lodging, health, handicaps, the reconciliation of the parents' professional life with their family life etc etc

We cannot have this set of observations which I will incorrectly qualify as « materialistic », if we do not observe at the same time the evolutions within the family which I have just mentioned : the decrease of siblings, the increase of separations and blended families, the aging population etc. etc.

Finally, we cannot see this new set of observations if we forget to look at the contribution of information and communication technology or if we leave aside the concept of immortality and evolution of man, spread through the application of genetic discoveries.

As you can see, our idea of family policy integrates the totality of the human being. To go a bit further, family associations are not called to act instead on workers' unions, they are not called to sign collective conventions, neither to negotiate with employers unions. However, who can state the world of work does not have any consequence on family life ? Where, when and how is the family given a say in this subject ?

Considering families as economic, social and cultural partners imposes the questioning of the definitions of the policies that concern them,

For a definition of general interest, in a democracy, the elected representatives should always have the final say, otherwise it will be an anarchy or a dictatorship. However a perennial question seems this : in a democratic society, who can utter the first word ? Who is by right the one to pronounce the first word ? How is the first word organised in our societies ? Historically, the first place belongs to social partners (unions and employers), but besides these two poles, during the 20th century various forms and objects of speech have developed, in some way multiple forms and objects of the first word. The voice of the family is amongst thousands of other voices, but like the others, in order to be recognized, it is challenged with the definition of what gives it the legitimacy to intervene, together with its representativity.

Legitimacy and representativity are at the heart of three inevitable conditions in order to have families considered as sustainable associates, even if our concept is restricted only to social policy.

### Three inevitable conditions

First and foremost, the organisation of the defense of family interests by the families themselves.

The name of this first condition should be enough without needing, a priori, very long explanations. However, if the aim of the title of this conference is to associate the families to the policies that concern them, this does not make sense unless the families organise themselves to make their voice heard. During my militant life, I have tried to battle for having something done, or of doing something with the families, but not to do it in their place. I am aware that this is an idea of representation that is not perhaps shared by everyone, but which is the most natural to me.

Taking into consideration what has been said about the area of the policies concerned, from my experience in my country, it seems to me that the forms of organising the defense of family interests can be articulated in various ways.

The French family movement is made up of what we call general movements and specific movements. General movements act on all the aspects of the family lives they group, whereas specific movements only act on the specificity of their groups (families with disabled children, families with multiple births, families of railroad workers etc) only to quote three examples.

Then, these different associations or movements can decide to come together or to continue to act on their own, according to what they deem the most useful to their cause, or according to the strategies of increasing the number of members, the geographical establishments or of widening the areas of family concerns and of actions with the families.

In France, this grouping of several movements, be they general or specific, was done in a natural way through the existence of the UNAF, since through it, the movements can have access to an important number of representations during official instances, be they national or local. Besides these questions on the choice of the organisation : general or specific ? alone or in groups ? another question arises regarding the stand we take: are we in a lobbying position or in that of a social partner ?

From the choice of our position depends, according to me, the whole concept of acting and representing, so as to be able to associate or not the families to the definition and the setting up of policies that concern them.

This choice obliges us to clarify the cultures of these positions.

In the lobbying culture it is important to permanently show the ideal of our concept of public policies to implement, without trying to come to terms on the time it takes to do so. By doing so, we will be giving others the responsibility to decide. We are therefore in a position of double intellectual satisfaction : that of not having given up anything in the name of our ideal, and that of being able to criticise the decisions taken by others. This function and culture of lobbying has its usefulness, even on the subject of « family », but we will not go deeper into it now, if the aim of this conference is its title : parental consent as sustainable associates in social policy since, in its very essence, this culture functions on the model of requirements and not on that of shared responsibility

On the other hand, in a culture of social partnership, it is still indispensable to display the ideal to attain, but we try to reach, with the partner or partners involved, a common diagnosis by expressing and listening to our mutual constraints. Then we try to overcome our constraints, and negotiate together on what we would like and what is feasible, and we end up by putting in writing where we have arrived in the discussion, and then start to implement the points on which we have agreed, in the name of the principle of reality.

The difficulty of such a process increases if the association concerned is of multiple composition, because at the end of the negotiations, there is regularly at least one of the constituents who affirms that the negotiators have passed from reaching a compromise to dishonesty, and that they have « sold » or even « sold off » the common ideal. This behaviour of social partnership implies therefore to know and to acknowledge one's macro-economic environment.

In a globalisation context, as well as in the decentralisation process in mainland France, we are not the only ones ; in the context of a Europe who unfortunately has been searching for its identity since the 29th May 2005, in the context of an unequalled crisis since decades, we must integrate an inescapable fact : not the overall scarcity of public funds but the urgent need of its redeployment and the drastic decrease of funds to allocate, without mentioning having to curb public debt. Asking to have families associated to the defining of policies concerning them does not stand a chance to succeed if those who formulate this request brand the position of « everything, immediately », and if they refuse to take into consideration the notion of time together with the great macro-economic balances. Thus, even if the choice made is that of the culture of social partnership, the result is not guaranteed, because then there is the problem of having the legitimacy to intervene be recognized legally.

The second inevitable condition – recognizing legally the role of social, economic and cultural partnership played by families. Even here the explanation of this condition is clear. In order to have an agreement recognized juridically, the signatory parties must legally have the power to implement policies. This presupposes that the elected members recognize the family as an actor of society, and that this recognition is translated to the law, so that the organisations who have undertaken the responsibility of defending the family be considered as fully-committed economic, social and cultural parties. However we have to be clear : this recognition will be easy to obtain

if the organisation that demands it is representative of the families on whose behalf it is expressing itself. Let me give a rather caricatural example : if we are dealing with public policies regarding infancy and the requests are proposed only by associations mostly made up of grandparents, the chances to succeed will be clearly lower than if we were dealing with associations of young parents.

However this question of representativity by age must not be an absolute. Since we are in the sphere of the family, the guideline must be the equilibrium among generations, which implies that in instances of representation, there are at least as many parents as grandparents, which unfortunately is not always the case.

It is a pity, because that weakens the defence of the family.

It goes without saying that to have a recognized representativity, the law is inevitable. In France, we are lucky because we have this law since 1945 but it is best to remain vigilant because in the future, it will not suffice to justify the prerogatives it offers. The diversity of sensitivities, ages and geograohical establishments, together with the wide spectrum of family situations, will be checkpoints of this representativity.

In my opinion, it is useful nowadays as it was yesterday to try to be coherent in our analysis. Following the example of the media or of a certain number of our fellowcitizens, we cannot believe that the question of representativity and therefore « the ability to express oneself in the name of all » concerns workers unions, employers unions and political aprties..., and deem it incongruous with the sector of associations in general, and with the Family Movement in particular. Let us be clear, in all so called developed countries, we are all faced with the corelation between the rise of the standard of living of our fellow citizens and that of their individualism. We know very well that the commitment and the time given to defend the general interest mobilise less people than they used to do in the past.

Last inevitable condition – organizing public meetings between the government and all the actors of the family policy.

There again my analysis is partially based on union practises.

Except when it come to situations of conflict, which encourage social dialogue, this means the setting up of regular meetings and negotiation.

If I try to look objectively at 10 years of annual conferences on the family, I remain fully convinced that this procedure has allowed us to take real steps forward to respond to the needs of the families, and it was also the occasion of a public speech showing the interest of the country in those who have made the choice of maternity and paternity.

However, this success of the annual conference of the family made others jealous : associations of disabled persons, organisations of retired people...everyone wanted his annual conference ; this also provoked a strong opposition on behalf of the minister of finance because it goes without saying that the government could not organize such conferences without incurring expenses. Obviously - the principle of reality and the culture of social partnership demand it – at times these expenses were rather symbolic, but there were also occasions when they were more than a billion

euros involved, or when they represented an interesting step forward for the family like the 15 days of paternity leave.

Finally, after 10 years, it is the ministry of finance who won the game and the annual conference of the family which used to be held at the Prime minister's and which was under his patronage has now been replaced by an « haut conseil » responsible of writing reports. The symbolism is no longer the same, let alone the results.

It is a pity, because imperceptibly, we are only turning to the family to fulfill better its educational role – as if the family was the sole responsible for our social illnesses, or the one who should make us fulfill better our filial duties towards our aging parents. In all developed countries, we are getting evermore worried with the questions raised by aging populations and in debates on the macro-economic balances, what is being emphasized is the people's dependancy and health, to the detriment of families with young children.

Should I take the risk of doing a humble psychoanalysis, I would say that our countries are sinking in a depressive spiral, by investing more in death and in its refusal, than in its young future.

And it is because I believe in the role of the family as the future that I continue to fight for the family, and it is because of all this that i sincerely believe that the theme of this conference arrives just at the right moment to question those who are in a position of responsibility, it arrives just in time to put the family at the centre of the sustainable development of our planet.